

Vengeance From The Past!

By Geoff St. Reynard

**Ray Rollins fought to preserve the Space
Station—and Earth—from an enemy mankind had
forgotten. An enemy in hiding, awaiting its—**

Vengeance From The Past!

It started during the program. The little noises were there but I didn't pay any attention to them, and I don't know now whether I thought they were the wind and the rain or maybe some realistic sound effects on tv. Of course they were the small sounds made by the two things that wanted to get into my house. They tried the doors, turning the knobs and pressing their bodies against the panels, and then they prowled around testing the windows. They were as silent as cobras but windows pushed or doors shoved will make some noise and so the little creaks were there but I paid no attention to them.

Then I got the feeling that someone was looking at me.

Nuts. My background as a fiction writer was getting under my skin. Someone watching me, my God, from where? The French windows behind me? Who'd be out in this downpour? I was glad my wife Nessa was asleep upstairs. With a baby on the way she needed her rest. Just to ease my rippling spine, I'd give a quick glance over my shoulder.

I did.

I saw a face like a gigantic mask. Enormous skull, low brow, small chin and thick-lipped mouth; wide cheeks and a mass of tumbled gray hair crowning the hatless head. Suggestion of a body like a gorilla's clad in dark broadcloth. Hands pressed flat on the glass, short thumbs and long fingers thick as country sausages. Worst of all the ghastly thing, two thinned eyes that caught the light of the tv lamp and shot it back at me as glowing crimson oblongs of animal

hate. This creature, standing rock-steady beyond the full-length windows that were streamed and blurry with the driving rain, this beast, this—

I closed my eyes tight and then opened them. It was gone into the rain, an optical illusion! It had really spooked me there for an instant, the old marrow was still cold from the first grisly shock.

I turned and started watching the set again. I started to chuckle to myself. I heard the French windows snap and groan a little with the wind. Then I heard the fretful sound of a strained and snapping bolt. *That* wasn't the wind! I jumped to my feet and whirled around. I froze where I stood. A hulking brute with a mask for a face was coming for me and then I saw the face was a face and not a mask at all.

Another man behind the horror said sharply, "Don't touch him, Old One!" and those paws with the sausage fingers fell reluctantly. I backed up two steps and the tv set held me from going any further. The second intruder passed the horror and thrust out his hand, which was about as big as a hand can be without becoming an outside foot; it took me a moment to realize that he meant me to shake it. When I didn't move, he grinned and said in his deep voice, "Don't know me, Ray?" and then I did know him. I was happier not remembering him, I wished I could stop knowing who he was, but now I did and I knew I was likely going to be dead before sunup, because he was Bill Cuff.

I did shake hands with him. I'm five-feet-ten and weigh one-sixty and I'm about as rugged as the average guy, or more so, because I play handball and used to be a pro footballer before I got married; but if I'd angered Bill Cuff he might have picked me up and torn

me into little scraps like a piece of bond paper. He was the strongest man I ever knew. And for a couple of years he'd been badly wanted by the police, because he had murdered at least a dozen people. I shook hands with him. I didn't like it but I wasn't going to pander to my preferences just then.

"Sit down, Ray," Bill said, as if it had been his house. "Sit down, Old One." This to his companion.

The thing with the face sat on the floor, folding down without effort till his hams rested on his heels. I sat on the couch. Bill Cuff walked up and down the room. He kept his voice pitched low as he talked and I knew that Nessa wouldn't hear a thing if she happened to be awake. I watched Cuff. He moved back and forth like a great panther brooding in its cage and planning an escape. There was something so easy in those movements of leg and body that the effect wasn't altogether human. Which wasn't surprising, in view of what he proceeded to tell me....

CHAPTER II

"You remember, Ray, the week I disappeared? You remember how I killed the two museum guards and the three cops, and afterwards the eight or ten searchers who were pursuing me through the swamp? It made headlines all over this country and the rest of the world too. Jack the Ripper had a grandson. Bill Cuff the mad berserker was unleashed on the world, breaking men's backs and twisting their heads in a nightmare of murder. Where would he strike next?

"And then I didn't strike, and they said I must be dead, drowned in the swamplands.

"I wasn't dead: obviously. I'd been discovered by a muster of the Old Companions, and was living in their HQ, an ancient wooden house in the center of the swamps. I was learning the history of my race, and the plans that it had for its future.

"My race, yes....

"Ray we are the Neanderthals...."

I didn't laugh at him, hearing Bill Cuff say that so soberly. I couldn't. Not with the *thing* sitting on the floor watching me; the thing that had stepped right out of a museum reconstruction of the Stone Age! Cuff went on talking.

"My memories came at me in a flood, remembrances of the dawn of time. I fled in retrospect from the encroachments of Man, he who was a little like me but so vastly different; Man who gradually, painstakingly wiped out my breed. Or so he thought. He forgot the matings, the myriad couplings of Neanderthal bucks with human women. He forgot that dark blood runs stronger than light, that the bestial is stronger than the civilized, that a drop of wolf-blood will often make a dog a ravening brute, that one small dilution of Neanderthal carries down through years and centuries to crop up again, full-fledged and vigorous, time after time in an otherwise placid strain.

"The Neanderthal died, but his seed was carried in the bodies of Homo sapiens, and after a period cropped out in violent flowering as the Pict. Luck brought out the great strain in force, and banding together in the isles, we were a race apart once more. Then time

conquered us a second season; the Picts were vanquished and their pitiful remnants bred once more into the watery outlander life-form, that of Man.

"Then in later ages we discovered ourselves as different, but never could make of ourselves a dominant race: so we were hunted in ones and twos, and when our ancient blood cried for vengeance on Man, we slew him and died alone. We were the so-called werewolves and the vampires, the ghouls, the ogres, the incubi and succubi, the Good Folk and changelings and devils of the woods. We who always fought Man, unknowing what we were or why we fought, we formed the basis of every legend that told of horrible alien things lying in wait beside every path and in every fen and bog and desolate place.

"In the eighteenth century we were the raging madmen of Bedlam.

"Late in the nineteenth, science unwittingly came to our aid. The Neanderthal man emerged from dry bones as a beast, a manlike animal who had fallen to make way for *Homo sapiens*. And gradually those of us who had the dawn brain, the remembrance of glories far past, realized that we were not mad, but poor deluded men who thought ourselves different—we *were* different. We were the descendants and inheritors of the Neanderthal, he who came before man and was in many ways better, stronger, more savagely intelligent and possessed of much higher capabilities. We were not men, and the time was coming when we would no longer need to masquerade as men. We were coming into our inheritance!"

Bill Cuff halted in front of me and his face, broad, heavy-boned, topped with thick black hair and carrying an expression of cruel

and truculent power, now lit up with malignant glee. I felt a cold chill.

"And all this I remembered in a space of two days!

"What I remembered best was the hate.

"We hated you—oh, God, how we hated! Imagine the hate you'd feel toward a race from Mars that came and overran your planet and stamped out your folk till only a pitiful handful were left. Man had come and usurped *our* earth, hadn't he? So the blood remembered, and hated."

Bill Cuff laughed suddenly.

"Ray, I'm not mad, as you were just thinking. I offer you that as proof: we are to a degree telepathic. All of us. Yet *men* are not.

"It's true. We are the Neanderthals. We are not human. And we have returned to take back our inheritance, which is the world!"

CHAPTER III

He allowed me to sit without speaking for the space of about ten minutes. I needed that time. I had to go all over what he'd said, consider each statement, try to forget that it sounded like fantasy, try to realize that Bill Cuff and Lord knew how many others of the so-called Old Companions believed this yarn with their whole energies. I had to take the tale and consider it in its entirety, as a broad concept which might be true, and then I had to grit my teeth and look at the significance of it as if by some incredible, wild chance it *were* true....

The significance was horrible, of course, but it was doubly or rather trebly awful for me personally, because Bill Cuff was my cousin.

His father, who'd died before Bill was born, had been my mother's brother.

And the reason I say it was trebly bad for me was that upstairs my wife Nessa lay asleep, and stirring in her was our child.

And if Bill Cuff was right, then that child and I myself came of a race that was only partly human; and neither of us could call ourselves by the proud title of Man.

At the end of ten minutes, the creature called Old One roused himself and gave a grunt. It seemed to be a two-syllable word, but of no language I ever knew.

Bill Cuff nodded and replied, "Yes he does, Old One," showing that it had actually conveyed meaning. I looked again at that ferocious mask, and I think I began believing Bill Cuff's story with an intelligent awareness of its truth, right then. Old One was a Neanderthal. Only a blind idiot could have doubted it.

"Now here's the reason I've come here to tell you this," began Bill Cuff, and I waved a hand to stop him.

"I know why," I said huskily. "We're cousins. You think the same blood may run in my veins."

"It does without a doubt. You see, I've checked on my mother, who's still living; and she isn't a carrier. So it was my father—your uncle. And you may not have the memory, Ray, but you have the blood. You're Neanderthal too."

"So you want me to come out to the swamps and join you?"

Bill Cuff flung himself onto the couch beside me, leaning near, breathing into my face. His breath smelled like raw meat, or maybe it was my imagination. He said, his voice a rumbling growl, "No, that isn't why I came. I want to find Howard. And I think you know where he is."

My belly contracted and my palms that were already damp became clammy.

I got up and paced the room nervously. My brain was clanking and buzzing in a kind of scrambled gear.

Howard Rollins was my brother. He was a scientist, a top-flight brain; serious where I'm flippant, keen where I'm fuzzy, and high-IQed where I'm sort of upper-middle-minded. He'd been working for the government since the establishment of Oak Ridge. Right at that moment he was on a small heavily forested scrap of land off the Maine coast, a bit of wind-swept earth called Odo Island. I knew what he was doing and it was as important as the atom bomb, or maybe even more so. I knew these things because Howard trusted me. I said to Bill Cuff, "He's on Pompey Island."

Cuff's gray eyes glinted. I noticed now that Old One's eyes were exactly the same color. "*Cachug*," said Cuff, or some damn fool grunt that sounded like it, and Old One got up and went out of the French windows into the wind and rain, lurching like a clothed gorilla. Then my cousin turned to me once more.

"We know what he's doing, Ray; but we couldn't find out where he was doing it. We have Old Companions in the government, but none who were placed in your position, who'd know where

Howard was despite the heavy curtain of secrecy. So I had to risk coming into the city to see you." He seemed to listen then, to sounds which I couldn't hear. He grinned. "Now," he said, "how soon can you wind up your affairs for, say, a week?"

"Right now," I said, almost without thinking. "I have six scripts completed—"

"Then you'll meet us in Boston tomorrow afternoon—five sharp beside the City Hall on School Street."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "What—"

"We'll explain everything then. Don't worry, Ray. You deal fairly with us and we'll deal more than fairly by you. If you're telling me the truth, if you play ball, you'll be the first member of the Old Companions accepted in spite of lack of dawn memory. A proud thing," he said, drawing himself up to his impressive full height, "a very proud thing, Ray." The flame of a fanatic shone in the gray eyes, and then he had turned and was gone and I was staring at the dead tv set and licking my lips that were dry as tomb-dust.

When I was sure they had both gone, I crossed to the French windows and secured them with a chair, and then I went to the phone. I had to call the police right away, of course; I was believing the mad Neanderthal story, but I knew that the light of morning might force me to discredit it; nevertheless, Bill Cuff the multiple murderer had been here, and the cops would have to know. Thank God I'd given my cousin the wrong address for Howard! I picked up the phone and started to dial the police.

To this day I don't know why I racked the phone before I'd finished dialing. Some hunch, I don't know what it was. I stood there in the

diffused radiance of the tv lamp, still trembling from my recent interview with that ripper and his apeman sidekick, and for a few minutes I didn't do anything but breathe heavily, and then I turned and raced up the stairs.

Not until I saw the empty bed, the blanket and sheet on the floor, the open window, not till then did I face the fact that Bill Cuff would never have left me without taking along a hostage.

Nessa was gone!

CHAPTER IV

I caught the seven a.m. train for Boston. I hadn't slept or even lain down all night. The sole conclusion I'd come to was that I didn't dare ask for help in this job, not yet at any rate. I would be jeopardizing Nessa's life.

I had thought of the police. But they'd had two years to find Bill Cuff and failed. One hint that they were looking for him, and he with his crazy Old Companions would stamp out my wife's life as off-handedly as I'd squash a beetle. I'm a law-abiding citizen and I respect the enforcers of the law; but this was a special case. I'd done my civic duty other times, but now I was on a one-man crusade. I had to save Nessa. If I could chop down Cuff, well and good. But Nessa came first.

As the train shot along through countryside scattered with dying autumn foliage, swept with intermittent rains, I thought of my brother Howard and his work. On Odo Island he and six other top-grade brains were creating a space station for the United States—a

man-made moon, the first jump to the stars—and equally important, a lookout post from which we could keep tabs on all of Earth.

A lot of the heavy forest on Odo was false; it couldn't be detected from the air, and the formation of the island prevented its being seen from the sea, but plenty of that green was only a big canopy shielding the small air field on which a great wheel-shaped space station had already been put together. 237 feet across, it would in the near future be carried off the earth, towed by the enormous three-stage rockets which were already waiting in hiding along the eastern coast of the States. One thousand miles up—one thousand *plus*—it would then become a satellite of Terra.

Odo was guarded by its coast, a real rock-bound wreckers' paradise, and by six brace of anti-aircraft guns. There were forty Marines based there, six scientists, and eighty-odd workmen. Everyone had been screened back to his grandparents, and evidently none of the Old Companions had been able to worm in, since Bill Cuff hadn't known where the artificial moon was being constructed.

Pompey Island was about twelve miles to the south of Odo. There wasn't anything on it but trees and the only chuckle I could muster during that whole train ride was at the picture of Bill Cuff at the head of a hundred Neanderthal men (all clad in mammoth skins and carrying stone-headed clubs) landing on Pompey and roaring over it in search of my brother and his metal moon.

I had no idea why I was to meet Cuff in Boston. For all I knew, Nessa might be held in New York, in Alabama, or in Evanston, Illinois. But I had to go to Boston, because I had no other lead whatever. I couldn't form plans because I was so totally in the dark.

I just had to do what I could. And I had to be ready to think like lightning when I did meet Cuff and find out what was happening.

Just as we drew into the station, I used an old writer's trick: I swallowed a couple of dexedrine tablets so that for a few hours my fatigue would lie down and I'd have a kind of false vigor of intellect and muscles. I'd be mighty tired by morning, but for now I'd be at peak. I got off and took a taxi to a hotel near School Street. I bathed and shaved and checked my automatic and the extra clips in my jacket; then I ate an early supper and walked over to City Hall.

On the nose of five o'clock a gray car drew up and one of the men in the back seat rolled down the window and gestured me over. I got in beside the driver and we moved away into the traffic. Nobody said anything until we had left Boston behind and were almost into Lynn. Then Bill Cuff said from the back seat, "You seem pretty calm, Ray," and laughed. "That's the blood," he said admiringly. "That's the dark blood. A *man* would be fizzing and twitching and babbling his head off."

I had determined not to think any further than the rescue of Nessa. I wasn't going to bog down in speculations as to my humanness, or the truth of this whole theory of Cuff's; but even so, the chills chased over me when he said *man* like that. Wasn't I altogether human? Would I, too, eventually experience the dawn brain's awakening, the revulsion against humanity, the reversion to pre-historic emotion?

I said as casually as possible, "Seems you don't trust the dark blood any further than you could spit it, Bill."

"Not in you, not yet. I'm sorry about Nessa. She was a sensible precaution. You wouldn't think much of my wits if I hadn't taken her."

"Where is she?" I held my breath tensely.

"You'll see her at the end of the trip."

"And when's that?" My breathing relaxed a trifle.

"Few hours."

"He wants to know too much," said the driver. I looked over at him. He was a thick, short, shallow-templed fellow, gray of eye and straight of thin-lipped mouth. He had ears like a baby elephant's long unkempt hair draping over them. I could smell his breath three feet away.

"Shut up, Trutch," said Bill Cuff impatiently. "He's my cousin."

"But has he the dawn brain? Are you sure he—"

"Shut up. Just shut up," said Bill, and his voice was like that of a maniac holding himself in with a terrible effort.

"I don't think you ought to tell him things like—" persisted Trutch, and then Bill Cuff had leaned forward and given him a hell of a wallop on the side of the head with his open palm. The driver jerked forward and grunted and then he was quiet, as the car lurched and recovered. We were doing fifty. Cuff said, "Shut up! When I tell you that, do it!"

There were two other men in the back. One of them growled, "Easy, Bill. We live by the primal rage, but you must control it."

I turned and put my arm across the back of the seat and looked at the man who had spoken. He was another of the short and stocky breed. His eyes were snapping gray gems in a face as tan as a boot. He had more hair piled on top of his long skull than I ever saw on anyone but a movie actor: it was bright yellow, not gold but sulphur yellow, and slicked with oil. His features were broad and at the same time vulpine, the thickened muzzle of a fox. I had meant only to glance at each of them in turn, but my gaze was held by this Old Companion. His expression was good-humored and yet he radiated evil, an old, old wickedness commingled with piercing intelligence. When at last I managed to tear my eyes from him, I knew that this was the worst of my enemies. I could not have defended that by logic, but neither could I have been argued out of it. I would have faced five giant Bill Cuffs rather than this yellow-haired creature.

"My name is Skagarach," he said to me, bringing my eyes back to him involuntarily. "I am third leader in our muster of the Old Companions. You have met the second leader, Old One. That is the truth of our folk. In time, in generations, we shall all look so, and the effete refinements of Homo sapiens will be gone." He glanced at Bill Cuff, who towered beside him, watching me. "Bill is first leader. In two years he has become so. He killed nineteen of us to gain that leadership." Skagarach smiled, cunningly and drily. I gathered that he was not fond of my cousin. And that was my first piece of real hope.

"The man at the wheel," he went on, "is called Trutch. As far as I know he has no other name. The fourth is Vance." This last was a young fellow, about as wide as he was high, with the usual gray eyes.

"Are the eyes a distinguishing characteristic?" I asked.

"Some ninety per cent of us have them. You do yourself. But every gray-eyed man is not Homo-Neanderthal by any means."

"How *do* you—we—tell each other apart from men?"

"Actions: Cuff killed insanely, from a human viewpoint, that is, and then answered our telepathic call. Occasionally we have only actions, not mental communication, to judge by, and then we find the one who has gone berserk and test him. Sometimes the dawn brain returns to an Old Companion without the gift of telepathy."

"Suppose I were to say that I remembered being a caveman. How would you test that?"

Skagarach and Bill Cuff grinned. The other two seemed without humor. "Go ahead, tell us what you remember," said my cousin.

"I don't—but suppose I say, I remember hunting a mammoth...."

"You would be lying. You'd recall other things—mating with human women, being stalked to your death, fighting the upstart Man. You would have flashes of other centuries, of being named werewolf, vampire, hobgoblin, ogre, bugbear and demon. Always the violence, the antagonism to man, the slaying and being slain. Not the common everyday life, but the high and savage points."

"I see. You give me a swell opportunity to lie to you," I told him candidly. I had nothing to lose, for I wouldn't bother lying. I had a hunch it wouldn't do me any good in this swift job I had to do.

"There are other checks on you," said Skagarach. He leaned forward suddenly. "Truthfully—*do you* have stirrings when I say

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